

Opinion

Deer Lodge Centre's veterans deserve better treatment

By: Virginia Vaillancourt
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Amalgamation of health-care bargaining units could threaten the unique bond between Deer Lodge Centre staff and the veterans and families they serve.

There are few Canadians who are more generally respected than our veterans. Most Canadians would wholeheartedly agree with that statement. Why, then, do governments and administrators fail to take that sentiment and transform it into high-quality care for the people they claim to respect so very much?

Canada's veterans and the people who serve them are asking the same question. The federal government professes the same belief about its support for veterans, yet every day, we see more reductions to services and challenges to serve the people who have served us so well.

One great example of this contradiction between public will and government action is unfolding at Deer Lodge Centre in Winnipeg. Since this facility was transferred to

provincial jurisdiction in 1983, services have been reduced and the quality of care has gone down. The federal government sent money and their good wishes but did little followup or monitoring. The provincial government took the money, put it in its bank account and told the centre to keep on operating.

The centre tried to manage with this reduced funding, but that meant cutting costs and reducing services to veterans — an unacceptable situation that continues to date.

This pattern of funding and service cutbacks is not new. The previous federal government had an active program to cut costs and funding, and even closed service offices where veterans could get personal assistance.

The new federal government restored some of the funding and reopened some service centres, then the cutbacks started again.

In 2017 and 2018, there were cutbacks in staff and services at Deer Lodge Centre. Some staff were laid off and others had their hours cut, but even so, the workload was increased. Staff picked up extra duties in medical care, such as IV drips and additional housekeeping duties. They were told to lower the personal-hygiene standards and daily baths became every second day. Veterans have suffered as a result.

When the workers, through the Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees (UVAE), raised these concerns, we were told by a senior administrator the number of veterans is decreasing and they wouldn't be around in a few more years. That is just plain disrespectful to existing veterans and to those who are coming into their ranks from conflicts in such places as Bosnia and Afghanistan.

The end result of all this has been disastrous for veterans and their families. Now, it's about to get worse. The government of Manitoba is consolidating bargaining units through Bill 29, the Health Care Bargaining Unit Review Act. This will result in reducing whatever sense of community staff and veterans have created at Deer Lodge Centre, and will see the veterans unit swallowed up in the giant provincial health-care system.

It doesn't have to be this way. For more than 40 years, members of the UVAE have been providing services to veterans at this facility. Together with veterans and their families, we have created a real community for our respected veterans and their families. We fear their level of care and that sense of community could easily be lost. We can keep this great community of care with one simple act: give Deer Lodge Centre permission to have "unique status" under the proposed legislation and allow it to continue to serve Canada's veterans.

We do not want to just continue those services. We want to enhance and improve them. We also want them to be there for future veterans and veterans who are currently homeless on the streets of Winnipeg and other Canadian cities. They have served us, and they deserve the best care and services a grateful country can provide.

We think Canadians will agree.

Our veterans deserve better. Now, it is up to us to deliver.

Virginia Vaillancourt is the national president of the Union of Veterans’ Affairs Employees.

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